

## ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS: AN INDICTMENT OF PATRIARCHY, CASTE SYSTEM AND CHRISTIANITY

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**Abstract:**

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) instantly known in the world of literature, deals with, apart from many other things, pain and suffering of the individual in a setting of all round cruelty unchecked and unstopped, since the constraints fail so often that they may as well not exist. The novel deals with cruelty that spills out of established institutions of society like family and marriage, machinery for keeping law and enforcing justice, and the complicated system determining gender inequality in society. The injustice that the touchables have to suffer, the insults and abuses women in society have to bear and the trials and tribulations, the defenceless have to undergo under brutalized machinery in a caste-ridden and hierarchical society, all of these become the subject matter of Arundhati Roy's book. The novel suggests that the cruel treatment meted out to the untouchable is but an extension of inherent cruelty in society which is visible in its treatment of women and other defenceless persons. Arundhati Roy portrays the miserable condition of the Paravans who converted to Christianity. The dawn of Independence improved their condition, though being Christians; they were not entitled to job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates. Roy also takes up the cause of the oppressed women and brings upon it a sharp focus. Arundhati Roy brings out the odds against a woman in a male dominated society. Women have been portrayed by Roy as objects of oppression, and subjugation, domestic violence and discrimination, societal pressures and prejudices. An interesting point concerning the universe of Arundhati Roy's novel is that it is not peopled by moral monsters and yet evil is cropping up at every nook and cranny.

**Key Words:** Amelioration, Maladjustment, Patriarchal, Retaliate, Subjugation, Subliminal & Transgression

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is set in a village in the state of Kerala. The Ayemenem house was dominated by the traditional patriarchal norms. The men in and around the house were conservative in their outlook. It is this orthodoxy of belief concerning the place of women, their rights and the personal freedom enjoyed by them that provides Arundhati the subject for her novel *The God of Small Things*.

The novel *The God of Small Things* tells the story of a woman, Ammu divorced by her husband and neglected by her family. Ammu is the daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi and sister of Chacko. She had a traumatized childhood having seen how her father used to beat her mother and being beaten herself in habitual working out of sadistic fits of rage. She was deprived of higher education because her father thought that girls should not have it. Pappachi, her father was outwardly a model citizen. Though servile and fawning in his dealing with white men, he otherwise carried himself with dignity and had a good reputation in his work. At home, however, he was very different, being a cruel tyrant to his wife and children. Home for Ammu was no less than a prison and it was mostly because of her need to escape from it that she entered matrimony in a hurry. It was not an arranged marriage as was the custom rather her own decision. Ammu married, out of her community, a Bengali young man working as Assistant Manager in a Tea Plantation in the north. She discovered after marriage that he was a feckless alcoholic who, to save himself from being dismissed, was willing to accept the indecent proposal of his boss Mr. Hollick. Aghast, she left him with her twins Rahel and Estha. Ayemenem, her parent's house, did not receive her with any warmth. She returned to "everything she had fled from only a few years ago" (1) and her father did not believe her story "because he didn't believe that an Englishmen, any Englishmen, would covet another man's wife." (2) Her brother Chacko went to Oxford while she was deprived of higher education even in India. Chacko married abroad, had a divorce and came back. The child of that marriage, Sophie was left in her mother's care in England. His belief in his sole ownership of his parents' property is suggested quite early in the novel by his habit of claiming everything as his own. He would joke: "What is yours is mine and what is mine is also mine." (3) In Ayemenem the life of Ammu came to a standstill. She was lonely and restless living in a drab and unfriendly environment. As a married woman, and a divorcee she had no position in parents home. A divorced daughter has no position anywhere, the novel insists on making this point, especially after she had married outside her community and broken faith.

She comes in contact with Velutha, an untouchable and a talented craftsman who had a rebellious spirit that made Vellaya, his father, uneasy;

Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation, an unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked, the way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel. While these were qualities that were perfectly acceptable in Touchables, Vellaya Paapen thought that in a Parvaan they could (and would, and indeed, should) be constructed as insolence. (4)

An illicit relationship develops between the spirited Paravan Velutha and the divorcee Ammu. But when it was discovered Ammu was locked in a room and Velutha was arrested and mercilessly beaten, beaten so badly that he died a few after that. No help came for Velutha because he was an untouchable, a Paravan. Even the Marxists who made political capital out of his death let him fall into the hands of the police. The police were merciless mostly because, as the novel insists, he was a Paravan, an untouchable who got into an illicit relationship with a superior Syrian Christian woman. The police Inspector was equally brutal with Ammu and called her a "*Veshya*" and her children "*illegitimate*." (5)

Roy suggests that the dreams of the weak are the ones most surely to be crushed. The book shows maladjustment between two different gods – of the rich and of the poor. Mombatti the tallow stick has no glass, no protection, and no support and so is easily blown out by the surge of the wind. The two unprotected ones in the novel are Velutha and Ammu and have to forsake

the big things and indulge in small things. "They knew that there was nowhere to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things." (6)

The novel suggests that the cruel treatment meted out to the untouchable is but an extension of inherent cruelty in society which is visible in its treatment of women and other defenceless persons. In the novel we get to know that Velutha's grandfather Kelan had embraced Christianity to escape the scourge of untouchability. He later found that he had committed a blunder as such converts were given separate churches and priests and not permitted to mix with other superior Christians.

In Ayemenem House Mammachi remembers that there was a time when a Paravan had to wipe his footsteps with a broom lest a high-caste person should be polluted by putting his foot on it. It is only a special concession that Velutha, who was still a Paravan although his grandfather had converted to Christianity is allowed to enter the house, though only through the back door. Velutha's natural high spirits make him, more than anyone else, vulnerable to punishment. As a small boy when he visited Ayemenem house with his father to deliver the plucked coconut, they entered from the back entrance. As a young man he is treated suspiciously by Comrade Pillai the Communist Party boss in the town who does not like him for his caste and independent nature. As a mature man, he is falsely implicated in a case of attempted rape of Ammu and is dragged, beaten and killed. Arundhati Roy portrays the miserable condition of the Paravans. She shows how Pappachi and Mammachi treat them:

Pappachi would not allow Paravans in to the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that the touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. (7)

Those who converted to Christianity were called Rice-Christians because they were given some food and rice by the British. The dawn of Independence improved their condition, though being Christians; they were not entitled to job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates. As for Velutha, Mammachi takes pity on him and asks his father to send him to the untouchable's schools and later employs him as a skilled carpenter in her factory. She is also convinced that Velutha has the skills of an engineer who can mend radios, clocks and water pumps.

The love of Ammu and Velutha throws away scruples of caste, creed and community. When their love is discovered her family acts swiftly to put an end to it. Velutha, as an Untouchable, is not entitled to love someone of a high caste and stay alive. A complaint is lodged that he tried to rape a divorcee. This complaint is by Baby Kochamma who is Ammu's aunt, and sister of Mammachi, the mother of Ammu. Baby Kochamma would not simply let go such an opportunity to clip the wings of Ammu and punish Velutha whom she hated for having been called "*Mudlali Kutty*" in a procession of communist workers.

The novel thus explores class conflict though the relationship of Ammu and Velutha. Love, sex and marriage are related to social existence of human beings. Class, community and religion are not strong enough to stem the tide of human passions and none can control or guide human feelings with regards to love. The feeling of love is primitive and elementary and love often transgresses limits laid by society. Society run by its systems fears such impulses. The punishment given to the offenders is correspondingly demented harsh and brutal.

Perhaps Ammu, Estha and she were the worst transgressors.... Others also broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws... the laws that made grandmothers grandmother..... (8)

Velutha's father, who discovers his son's transgression, was furious. He thought that the unthinkable had been made thinkable and the impossible had happened. Mammachi also said "*Thoo, Thoo, Thoo*" Baby Kochamma thought that God must have punished Ammu for her sins and violations of law. For her, Ammu's conduct was so vile that she sees it as God's way of punishing Ammu for her earlier sins. Mammachi was horrified to think of her daughter's act of disgrace. She thought of her physical intimacy with "a man who was nothing but a filthy coolie". She thought and vomited.

She had defiled generations of breeding. She had bought the family on its knees. For generations to come people would point at them at wedding and funerals, at baptism and birthday parties. The family's social standing was at stake. (9)

It can be seen here that the two factors that unleash the barbaric violence are (a) the coming together of persons from two opposite classes-the high and the low, rich and poor, high caste and the low caste (b) the subliminal fear of natural impulses themselves mostly the sexual passion. What Ammu and Velutha did was a challenge to human nature's pursuit of ascendancy, order and control. Their punishment was the expression of society's hatred of Nature. Velutha's death was not a mere death, just the end of living. His deaths brought into play various manoeuvres and strategies. He was charged with kidnapping and murder. The Communist party accused the police of eliminating a party worker while it did not do anything to save him. It tried to get a political mileage and dividends out of his death. Baby Kochamma poisoned minds of Mammachi and Chacko that Ammu and her twins were responsible for the mishaps. So Ammu was made to leave the house. Estha was sent alone to live with his father. Consequently, Ammu worked elsewhere on a meagre salary in different capacities for four years. Then she died, due to many reasons. The Church refused to bury her. Hence she was taken to electric crematorium in a van. Her life came to an end. Her remains were crammed in a clay pot. "Receipt No. 498673".

Women have been portrayed by Roy as objects of oppression, and subjugation, domestic violence and discrimination, societal pressures and prejudices. Mammachi's husband beats her and resents her success as a business woman. She was almost blind yet he did not help her as he thought that pickle-making was not suitable for her. Mammachi was running the pickle factory well enough but Chacko, her son, thought he was the right person to run the factory and she tamely acquiesced.

Another strand of oppression is at the caste level. Paravan Velutha is a victim of society, of specific perverted social values and socio-economic biases. Even though caste is considered to be an inalienable part only of Hindu society, Roy presents it as equally deep rooted in the Syrian Christian community of Kerala. Mammachi does not permit the Paravan Velutha to come by the front door. Her horror at the discovery of Ammu's relationship with him is so extreme and wild because he is a Paravan. Baby Kochamma wonders how Ammu could overlook "the Paravan smell" that came out of a Paravan's body. Inspector Thomas Mathew too is a representative of the same class and caste because he had a "touchable wife", "two touchable daughters" and "whole touchable generations waiting in their touchable wombs." (10) Hence, his reaction is that of a high-caste person so he

immediately jumps to the conclusion that the untouchable is in the wrong and should be punished. Here, Arundhati Roy increases the pathos of the situation by combining the victimization of Velutha as a Paravan and as a worker. Comrade Pillai, who claims to be a communist and a party card-holder, exhibits a total lack of concern at the plight of Velutha. In fact a meeting between Chacko and Comrade K.N.M. Pillai shows the comrade in a very poor light. Comrade Pillai reveals to Chacko that Velutha was a card holding member of the party and warns him to be careful. He even suggests that Velutha may be sacked and sent away. When Chacko says he saw no reason to send Velutha away and in fact depended on him to run the factory, Comrade Pillai tells Chacko that other workers resented him as he was a Paravan. Comrade Pillai fully acknowledges the might and worth of caste:

After all, whatever job he does, carpenter or electrician, or whatever is it, for them he is just a Paravan. It is a conditioning they have from birth. This I myself have told them is wrong. But frankly speaking, Comrade, Change is one thing. Acceptance is another. You should be cautious. Better for him you send him off..... (11)

Velutha pays the price of being a Paravan in a society which obeys only the dictates of the rich and powerful. *The God of Small Things* deals with the victimization of the marginalized in a unique way. Not all the victims are parts of the same social class, caste or group. Ammu is a woman but not an untouchable or economically weak. The same is true of Mammachi, Velutha is male in the patriarchal system and hence above the female but he is an untouchable and belongs to the economically weaker section of the society. Chacko is an upper caste, upper class male a self declared Marxist but in fact only an ineffective romantic. All these levels of oppression and victimization operated simultaneously and continually. "The theme of victimization is the binding factor which makes *The God of Small Things* a unified work of art and an artistic achievement."(12)

The treatment of the untouchable in this novel is altogether different from the fleeting glimpses of them in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*. Raja Rao's basic concern was the portrayal of Gandhian movement transforming a village. So the amelioration of untouchable's problem formed only a part of it. Mulk Raj Anand's novel gave a detailed account of a day in the life of an untouchable Bakha who conscientiously performs the duties of a sweeper. His yearning for education, including the desire to speak English, remains unfulfilled even when he consents to pay his hard-earned money for it. Velutha, on the contrary, is an educated untouchable. He passed the High School Examination from a school meant for untouchables. He learned the craft of carpentry and put his skill to a good use by making intricate toys. But he remained a Paravan. It was in 1967 that the untouchables in Kerala were demanding that they no longer be addressed by their caste names-Parayan, Paravan or Pulayan- but by their first names. In the novel, Velutha is sighted in a procession with a flag signals a warning to the established order and the tremors felt in the age old architecture of oppression. If Velutha had not been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer. While doing a carpenters work, he designed a sliding door which became quite popular. Realizing Velutha's capability, Mammachi gave him the charge of general maintenance of her factory which caused resentment among the other touchable factory workers, who thought that an untouchable was promoted above them unjustifiably. Hence, caste remains a factor even after acquiring education and skills.

Being untouchables, both Bakha and Velutha have reasons to fear the high caste people. Whereas, Bakha remains unadvanced at his station, confining his dreams and ambitions in his head, Velutha is far ahead of him. This is because Mulk Raj Anand was portraying the untouchables of 1930's whereas Arundhati depicts them in 1960's. For just having touched a high caste man, Bakha gets a slap and in the process his packet of sweets is scattered in the dust. Velutha on the contrary, is much more aware of his position and naturally assertive. His father, Vellya Paapen has been completely tamed by the system. He begins to cry once he comes to know what his son has done. Torn between his love for his son and his gratitude to his masters, he chooses to betray his son. A situation of somewhat different kind does arise in Mulk Raj Anand's novel when Bakha's sister Sohini is molested by Pandit Kalinath. Even when Bakha wishes to take revenge, his father Lakha advises him against it. Because of his sense of fear Lakha could never think of retaliating against the high caste people. He discourages Bakha from hitting the high caste people back because he believes that "one word of theirs is sufficient against all that we might say before the police. They are our Masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us." (13) Lakha's cautious attitude and his impotent reaction even when he happens to be the molested girl's father are because he is a sweeper, while the molester is a high-caste man. In *The God of Small Things* the action takes a different line altogether. Mammachi's daughter and Vellya's son had made the unthinkable thinkable and the impossible really did happen.

In *Untouchable*, Mulk Raj Anand gives three solutions for the eradication of untouchability of which the first one is conversion to Christianity. Having been disgusted by the humiliating treatment at the hands of the touchable, Bakha is momentarily drawn towards Christianity. He listens to Hutchinson's statement that Christ sacrificed his life to help us all. His sacrifice was for all- for the rich, the poor, the Brahmin and the Untouchable. But Bakha is not convinced. Those who converted to Christianity in Kerala were promised equality in society but got a worse deal. It was like jumping from frying pan to fire. The persistence of caste after conversion to Christianity is a social fact in Kerala and also elsewhere in India. Arundhati Roy shows the deep-rootedness of caste in describing the situation of Paravans even after their having been converted to Christianity.

Arundhati Roy's novel deals with the disruptive impulses of human beings, and the façade of normalcy which people try to keep in their lives from day today. Man has two faces, one which he shows to others, and the other, his real one. There is a great deal of violence hidden behind the public face of people. The Kathakali men in the novel invoke and play out in their mimic dance the same violence. Once their play is over they become ordinary men. The Kathakali dance portion in the novel shows us the inflammatory quality of passions that lie hidden in human heart. It is through myths and kinetic arts that one can visualize them. These passions like passion in the heart of Ammu are destructive and fierce. The novel in its own way is an enactment of those elemental passions which seek to express themselves in our passionate wild natural moments.

*The God of Small Things* sees exploitation and the use of violence in a vast historical perspective. That is why it involves the historical claims of redemption made by noble ideas as Christianity and Communism and finds them failing. The Communist movement sets its political goal to build a classless society. In spite of its theoretical emphasis on equality and justice, the party

unit at Ayemenem cannot get rid of caste prejudices. The Communist organisation is concerned with maintaining itself. To acquire power it does not hesitate to destroy whom it claims to support. Comrade Pillai's conduct exposes the deceit and lack of conviction that masquerade as radical politics. Comrade Pillai lies to Inspector Mathews about Velutha not being a party card holder, hence enables the Inspector to exercise his brutality unhesitatingly and without fear.

"And there it was again. Another religion turned against itself. Another edifice constructed by the human mind decimated by human nature." (14) The whole system to radical belief and that seeks to end oppression and create a classless society is by what the writer calls "human nature." The policemen and politicians make sure that no transgressor of their rules is spared. Velutha is the extreme transgressor of rules, so he is abandoned by "God and History, by Marx, by man, by woman and by children." (15) What is the rule of which Vellutha is the transgressor? Arundhati Roy's answer is that Velutha's sin was not by the rules made by the masters for Parvans. A Parvans's station in life is to keep out of the path of caste people and certainly not to entertain any affection for any of the women of higher caste a category which exists among Christians (in Ayemenan) as much as in the Hindu community. Arundhati Roy's irony is never as bitter as it is here. Prof. Ranga Rao notices this championship of the weak and small in the novel:

"Roy's book is the only one I can think of among Indian novels in English which can be comprehensively described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities, small things: children and youth, women and untouchables." (16)

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6. *Ibid*, p. 338
7. *Ibid*, pp. 73-74
8. *Ibid*, p.31
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